



Desert Tortoise

Gopherus agassizii



Myrtle

My birthday is on September 1st, 1985.

I am an educational **ambassador animal**, so you will only be able to meet me during programs. When I am not on programs, I like to sleep under my warm heat lamp, walk around and explore the keeper area, or sniff my keepers shoes!

I am a **messy** eater, so sometimes you can see what I ate around my mouth.

DESERT TORTOISE AT A GLANCE



- The Desert Tortoise has a **high domed shell**. The shell's height can be between **4 to 6 inches**.
- The top of the shell is called a **carapace**. The bottom of the shell is called a **plastron**.
- To protect themselves, they will retract their head and legs into their shell.

Adult size:
5-14 inches long
up to 50 lbs

Shell size:
4-6 inches tall
8-15 inches long



- They have **high, scaled, flat, columnar legs** adapted for digging and burrowing.



Avg. life expectancy in native habitats: 35 to 40 years
Avg. life expectancy in human care: up to 80 years



- Desert Tortoises, like other turtles and tortoises, **don't have teeth**.
- They use their **sharp beak** to pick up food and chew to eat.
- In the wild, they eat **low-growing plants** and **fallen leaves**.
- At the zoo, Myrtle's favorite foods are **lettuce and sweet potato**.

WHERE ARE NATIVE DESERT TORTOISE HABITATS LOCATED?



Desert Tortoise's native range encompasses the Mojave and Sonoran Deserts of the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico. They thrive in the desert shrublands where they can be found in their burrows alongside the rocky hillsides.

Tortoise Behavior

BASKING

Like other reptiles, I am cold blooded. I need a heat source like the sun to stay warm and healthy.

I am resting and gathering my energy. I may look like I am sleeping.



EXPLORING

In the wild, I travel long distances for food, a home, or a mate. I like to walk around my keeper area.

I am curious about my environment and exploring what is going on



SHEDDING

I am a reptile and need to shed my scales and skin to grow bigger. This process includes the **scutes** of my shell.

Shedding is a natural process that helps me get big and healthy.



RETRACTING

When I feel like I am in danger, I will retract my head and legs into shell. The large scales on my front legs help me protect my head when I pull myself in.

If I am retracting my head and legs. I want to hide and I am stressed out.

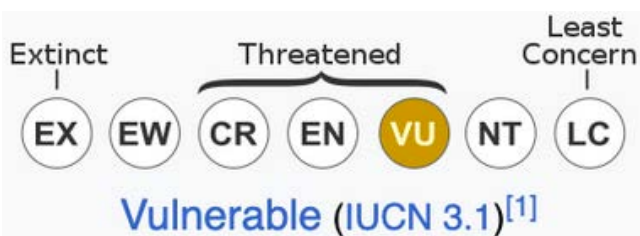


- In the desert, it can get above 105 degrees Fahrenheit so the Desert tortoise spends nearly **98%** of its life in underground burrows. They can go into a decreased physiological state called **estivation** in a burrow to combat the extreme heat.
- A common way tortoises defend themselves is to empty their bladder or "pee" if they are picked up or handled. This could lead to their death if they can't find water soon as they could become dehydrated.
- Desert tortoises are ecosystem engineers, which means they play an important role in holding their ecosystems together. As well as using their burrows to protect themselves from the harsh climate, the other reptiles that share their burrows rely on them for the same purpose.

Desert Tortoise Conservation

As more human activity and temperatures increase into the area, the access to water and habitat decreases causing tortoise populations to become more fragmented. Tortoises will need to travel longer distances for suitable water and space and cross man-made roads resulting in increased road mortality.

They are listed as **Vulnerable**. However, in the Mojave Desert, they are **Critically Endangered**. Climate change has worsened extreme temperatures and droughts.



How can we help?

We can be more efficient with our water use by taking shorter showers, wash only full loads, and check for leaks inside your home

We can also look for animals underneath our cars before going on road trips or if they are crossing when on the road. Keep your garbage in your car until you find a trash can. Food on the road attracts animals, making them susceptible to road collisions.